

Testimony Re: SB 12: An Act Authorizing and Adjusting Bonds of the State for Capital Improvements and Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act Matching Funds and Extending the Time Period for Distributing Grants for Certain Law Enforcement Equipment

Eileen Grant, President Friends of CT State Parks  
43 Neptune Ave.  
Madison, CT 06443

Dear Members of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee,

As President of the Friends of CT State Parks, I write in strong support of SB 12, particularly Section 11 of the Bill, which proposes a \$15million increase in bonding (to \$30 million) for Parks' infrastructure improvements and repairs.

Friends of CT State Parks, a coalition of 29 volunteer Friends groups with over 7000 members, donates considerable labor each year to enhance visitor experience in our State Parks and Forests (80,000 hours per year, valued at \$2.5million per annum). In addition, our groups have given over \$8.5 million in goods, land and equipment to a struggling Park System that has been seriously underfunded for three decades.

A constant during these last thirty years has been the inadequacy of the capital investment funds allocated by the State to repair, replace or modernize the aging infrastructure present in almost every Park and Forest. The System's buildings, whether they be irreplaceable historic structures or bathrooms essential to properly service CT family visitors, are universally in need of major restoration and upgrades. Parks' roadways, underground pipe networks, electrical systems, telecommunications connections, boat launches, pavilions and campgrounds must meet 21<sup>st</sup> century standards for safety and utility.

Visitation has ballooned to 13 million patrons annually. Attendance since the adoption of the Passport to Parks Program in 2018, in conjunction with the drive to the outdoors precipitated by the pandemic, has swelled the numbers visiting by 10-20% in each of the last years. The public's growing appreciation of our Parks is both welcome and gratifying. However, the press of visitors has also accentuated the long present deficiencies in infrastructure condition, function, and appearance.

In order to best support our State's robust tourism economy, it is vital that our Parks "look good", that they are well-maintained, that they provide the basic amenities desired, that no shortfalls in safety standards create liability for the State, and that any resultant negative publicity repress usage. All Parks and Forests should be accessible to the disabled with appropriate infrastructure in place. Upgrades to achieve this equity of access should be implemented with dispatch. We must also prepare our facilities for the coming challenges due to climate change.

We in Connecticut are so very fortunate to have so many natural and historic treasures in public hands. We need to demonstrate that we understand their merit by providing the investments commensurate with their value. The State's underfunding of the State Parks and Forest System is longstanding. As a volunteer in Parks since 1996, I remember with chagrin the uncompleted 2010 Infrastructure Plan, and then the do-over 2020 Plan, still unfulfilled. There is a daunting back log of projects that can wait no longer. It must be addressed now with increased bonding funds or the State will face far more punishing costs in the future resulting from critical work deferred.

Thank you for considering SB 12's vital enhancement in capital investment for our Park System.

Respectfully submitted,

Eileen Grant, President Friends of CT State Parks